The Breadwinners

A SOCIAL STUDY

POLLER

I.

A Morning Call.

A French clock on the mantelpiece, framed of brass and crystal, which betrayed its inner structure as the transparent sides of some insects betray their vital processes, struck ten with the mellow and lingering clangor of a distant cathedral bell. A gentleman, who was seated in front of the fire reading a newspaper, looked up at the clock to see what hour it was, to save himself the trouble of counting the slow, musical strokes. The eyes he raised were light gray, with a blue glint of steel in them, shaded by lashes as black as jet. The hair was also as black as hair can be, and was parted near the middle of his forehead. It was inclined to curl, but had not the length required by this inclination. The dark brown mustache was the only ornament the razor had spared on the wholesome face, the outline of which was clear and keen. The face suited the hands—it had the refinement and gentleness of one delicately bred, and the vigorous lines and color of one equally at home in field and court; and the hands had the firm, hard symmetry which showed they had done no work, and the bronze tinge which is the imprint wherewith sky and air mark their lovers. His clothes were of the fashion seen in the front windows of the Knickerbocker Club in the spring of the year 187—, and were worn as easily as a self-respecting bird wears his feathers. He seemed, in short, one of those fortunate natures, who, however born, are always bred well and come by prescription to most of the good things the world can give.

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He sat in a room marked, like himself, with a kind of serious elegance—one of those apartments which seem to fit the person like a more perfect dress. All around the walls ran dwarf bookcases of carved oak, filled with volumes bound in every soft shade of brown and tawny leather, with only enough of red and green to save the shelves from monotony. Above these the wall space was covered with Cordovan leather, stamped with gold fleurs-de-lis to within a yard of the top, where a frieze of palm-leaves led up to a ceiling of blue and brown and gold. The whole expression of the room was of oak and stamped leather. The low bookcases were covered with bronzes, casts, and figurines, of a quality so uniformly good that none seemed to feel the temptation either to snub or to cringe to its neighbor. The Owari pots felt no false shame beside the royal Satsuma; and Borbedienne's bronzes, the vases of Limoges and Lambeth and bowls from Nankin and Korea dwelt together in the harmony of a varied perfection.

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It was an octagon room, with windows on each side of the fireplace, in which a fire of Ohio coal was leaping and crackling with a cheerful and unctuous noisiness. Out of one window you could see a pretty garden of five or six acres behind the house, and out of the other a carefully-kept lawn, extending some hundred yards from the front door to the gates of hammered iron which opened upon a wide-paved avenue. This street was the glory of Buffland, a young and thriving city on Lake Erie, which already counted a population of over two hundred thousand souls. The people of Clairfield, a rival town, denied that there was anything like so many inhabitants, and added that "the less we say about 'souls' the better." But this was pure malice; Buffland was a big city. Its air was filled with the smoke and odors of vast and successful trade, and its sky was reddened by night with the glare of its furnaces, rising like the hot breath of some prostrate Titan, conquered and bowed down by the pitiless cunning of men. Its people were, as a rule, rich and honest, especially in this avenue of which I have spoken. If you have ever met a Buffalander, you have heard of Algonquin avenue. He will stand in the Champs Elysees, when all the vice and fashion of Europe are pouring down from the Place of the Star in the refluent tide that flows from Boulogne Wood to Paris, and calmly tell you that "Algonquin avenue in the sleighing season can discount this out of sight." Something is to be pardoned to the spirit of liberty; and the avenue is certainly a fine one. It is three miles long and has hardly a shabby house on it, while for a mile or two the houses upon one side, locally called "the Ridge," are unusually fine, large, and costly. They are all surrounded with well-kept gardens and separated from the street by velvet lawns which need scarcely fear comparison with the emerald wonders which centuries of care have wrought from the turf of England. The house, of which we have seen one room, was one of the best upon this green and park-like thoroughfare. The gentleman who was sitting by the fire was Arthur Farnham. He was the owner and sole occupant of the large stone house—a widower of some years' standing, although he was yet young. His parents had died in his childhood. He had been an officer in the army, had served several years upon the frontier, had suffered great privations, had married a wife much older than himself, had seen her die on the Plains from sheer want, though he had more money than he could get transportation for; and finally, on the death of his grandfather, he had resigned, with reluctance, a commission which had brought him nothing but suffering and toil, and had returned to Buffland, where he was born, to take charge of the great estate of which he was the only heir. And even yet, in the midst of a luxury and a comfort which anticipated every want and gratified every taste, he often looked longingly back upon the life he had left, until his nose inhaled again the scent of the sage-bush and his eyes smarted with alkali dust. He regretted the desolate prairies, the wide reaches of barrenness accursed of the Creator, the wild chaos of the mountain canons, the horror of the Bad Lands, the tingling cold of winter in the Black Hills. But the republic holds so high the privilege of serving her that, for the officer who once resigns—with a good character—there is no return forever, though he seek it with half the lobby at his heels. So Captain Farnam sat, this fine May morning, reading a newspaper which gave the stations of his friends in the "Tenth" with something of the feeling which assails the exile when he cons the court journal where his name shall appear no more.

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But while he is looking at the clock a servant enters.

"That same young person is here again."

"What young person?"

There was a slight flavor of reproach in the tone of the grave Englishman as he answered:

"I told you last night, sir, she have been here three times already; she doesn't give me her name nor yet her business; she is settin' in the drawin' room, and says she will wait till you are quite at leisure. I was about to tell her," he added, with still deeper solemnity, "that you were hout, sir, but she hinterrupted of me and said, 'He isn't gone, there's his 'at,' which I told her you 'ad several 'ats, and would she wait in the drawin' room and I'd see."

Captain Farnham smiled.

"Very well, Budsey, you've done your best—and perhaps she won't eat me after all. Is there a fire in the drawing room?"

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"No, sir."

"Let her come in here, then."

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A moment afterward the rustle of a feminine step made Farnham raise his head suddenly from his paper. It was a quick, elastic step, accompanied by that crisp rattle of drapery which the close-clinging garments of ladies produced at that season. The door opened, and as the visitor entered Farnham rose in surprise. He had expected to see the usual semi-mendicant, with sad-colored raiment and doleful whine, calling for a subscription for a new "Centennial History," or the confessed genteel beggar whose rent would be due tomorrow. But there was nothing in any way usual in the young person who stood before him. She was a tall and robust girl of eighteen or nineteen, of a singularly fresh and vigorous beauty. The artists forbid us to look for physical perfection in real people, but it would have been hard for the coolest-headed studio-rat to find any fault in the slender but powerful form of this young woman. Her color was deficient in delicacy, and her dark hair was too luxuriant to be amenable to the imperfect discipline to which it had been accustomed; but the eye of Andrea, sharpened by criticising Raphael, could hardly have found a line to alter in her. The dress of that year was scarcely more reticent in its revelations than the first wet cloth with which a sculptor swathes his kneaded clay; and pretty women walked in it with almost the same calm consciousness of power which Phryne displayed before her judges. The girl who now entered Farnham's library had thrown her shawl over one arm, because the shawl was neither especially ornamental nor new, and she could not afford to let it conceal her dress of which she was innocently proud; for it represented not only her beautiful figure with few reserves, but also her skill and taste and labor. She had cut the pattern out of an illustrated newspaper, had fashioned and sewed it with her own hands; she knew that it fitted her almost as well as her own skin; and although the material was cheap and rather flimsy, the style was very nearly the same as that worn the same day on the Boulevard of the Italians. Her costume was completed by a pair of eyeglasses with steel rims, which looked odd on her rosy young face.

"I didn't send in my name," she began, with a hurried and nervous utterance, which she was evidently trying to make easy and dashing, "because you did not know me from Adam—— I have been trying to see you for some time," she continued."

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"It has been my loss that you have not succeeded. Allow me to give you a chair."

She flushed and seemed not at all comfortable. This grave young man could not be laughing at her; of course not; she was good-looking, and had on a new dress; but she felt all her customary assurance leaving her, and was annoyed. She tried to call up an easy and gay demeanor, but the effort was not entirely successful. She said: "I called this morning—it may surprise you to receive a visit from a young lady——"

"I am too much pleased to leave room for surprise."

She looked sharply at him to see if she were being derided, but through her glasses she perceived no derision in his smile. He was saying to himself, "This is a very beautiful girl who wants to beg or to borrow. I wonder whether it is for herself or for some 'committee'? The longer she talks the more I shall have to give. But I do not believe she is near-sighted."

She plucked up her courage and said:

"My name is Miss Maud Matchin."

Farnham bowed, and rejoined:

"My name is——"

She laughed outright, and said:

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"I know well enough what your name is, or why should I have come here? Everybody knows the elegant Mr. Farnham."

The smile faded from his face.

"She is more ill-bred than I suspected," he thought; "we will condense this interview."

He made no reply to her compliment, but looked steadily at her, waiting to hear what she wanted, and thinking it was a pity she was so vulgar, for she looked like the huntress Diana.

Her eyes fell under his glance, which was not at all reassuring. She said in almost a humble tone:

"I have come to ask a great favor of you. I am in a good deal of trouble."

"Let us see what it is, and what we can do," said Farnham, and there was no longer any banter in his voice.

She looked up with sudden pleasure, and her glasses fell from her eyes. She did not replace them, but, clasping her hands tightly together, exclaimed:

"Oh, sir, if you can do anything for me—— But I don't want to make you think——" She paused in evident confusion, and Farnham kindly interposed.

"What I may think is not of any consequence just now. What is it you want, and how can I be of service to you?"

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"Oh, it is a long story, and I thought it was so easy to tell, and I find it isn't easy a bit. I want to do something—to help my parents—I mean they do not need any help—but they can't help me. I have tried lots of things." She was now stammering and blushing in a way that made her hate herself mortally, and the innocent man in front of her tenfold more, but she pushed on manfully and concluded, "I thought may be you could help me get something I would like."

"What would you like?"

"Most anything. I am a graduate of the high school. I write a good hand, but I don't like figures well enough to clerk. I hear there are plenty of good places in Washington."

"I could do nothing for you if there were. But you are wrong; there are no good places in Washington, from the White House down."

"Well, you are president of the library board, ain't you?" asked the high-school graduate. "I think I would like to be one of the librarians."

"Why would you like that?"

"Oh, the work is light, I suppose, and you see people, and get plenty of time for reading, and the pay is better that I could get at anything else. The fact is," she began, to gain confidence as she talked, "I don't want to go on in the old humdrum way forever, doing housework and sewing, and never getting a chance at anything better. I have enough to eat and to wear at home, but the soul has some claims too, and I long for the contact of higher natures than those by whom I am now surrounded. I want opportunities for self-culture, for intercourse with kindred spirits, for the attainment of a higher destiny."

She delivered these swelling words with great fluency, mentally congratulating herself that she had at last got fairly started, and wishing she could have struck into that vein at the beginning. Farnham was listening to her with more of pain than amusement, saying to himself: "The high school has evidently spoiled her for her family and friends, and fitted her for nothing else."

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"I do not know that there is a vacancy in the library."

"Oh, yes, there is," she rejoined, briskly; "I have been to see the librarian himself, and I flatter myself I made a favorable impression. In fact, the old gentleman seemed really smitten."

"That is quite possible," said Farnham. "But I hope you will not amuse yourself by breaking his heart."

"I can't promise. He must look out for his own heart." She had regained her saucy ease, and evidently enjoyed the turn the conversation was taking. "I find my hands full taking care of myself."

"You are quite sure you can do that?"

"Certingly, sir!" This was said with pouting lips, half-shut eyes, the head thrown back, the chin thrust forward, the whole face bright with smiles of provoking defiance. "Do you doubt it, Monsieur?" She pronounced this word Moshoor.

Farnham thought in his heart "You are about as fit to take care of yourself as a plump pigeon at a shooting match." But he said to her, "Perhaps you are right—only don't brag. It isn't lucky. I do not know what are the chances about this place. You would do well to get some of your friends to write a letter or two in your behalf, and I will see what can be done at the next meeting of the board."

But her returning fluency had warmed up Miss Maud's courage somewhat, and instead of taking her leave she began again, blushingly, but still boldly enough:

"There is something I would like much better than the library."

Farnham looked at her inquiringly. She did not hesitate in the least, but pushed on energetically, "I have thought you must need a secretary. I should be glad to serve you in that capacity."

The young man stared with amazement at this preposterous proposal. For the first time, he asked himself if the girl's honest face could be the ambush of a guileful heart; but he dismissed the doubt in an instant, and said, simply:

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"No, thank you. I am my own secretary, and have no reason for displacing the present incumbent. The library will suit you better in every respect."

In her embarrassment she began to feel for her glasses, which were lying in her lap. Farnham picked up a small photograph from the table near him, and said:

"Do you recognize this?"

"Yes," she said. "It is General Grant."

"It is a photograph of him, taken in Paris, which I received today. May I ask a favor of you?"

"What is it?" she said, shyly.

"Stop wearing those glasses. They are of no use to you, and they will injure your eyes."

Her face turned crimson. Without a word of reply she seized the glasses and put them on, her eyes flashing fire. She then rose and threw her shawl over her arm, and said, in a tone to which her repressed anger lent a real dignity:

"When can I learn about that place in the library?"

"Any time after Wednesday," Farnham answered.

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She bowed and walked out of the room. She could not indulge in tragic strides, for her dress held her like a scabbard, giving her scarcely more freedom of movement than the high-born maidens of Carthage enjoyed, who wore gold fetters on their ankles until they were married. But in spite of all impediments her tall figure moved, with that grace which is the birthright of beauty in any circumstances, out of the door, through the wide hall to the outer entrance, so rapidly that Farnham could hardly keep pace with her. As he opened the door she barely acknowledged his parting salutation, and swept like a huffy goddess down the steps.

Farnham gazed after her a moment, admiring the undulating line from the small hat to the long and narrow train which dragged on the smooth stones of the walk. He then returned to the library. Budsey was mending the fire.

"If you please, sir," he said, "Mr. Belding's man came over to ask, would you dine there this evening, quite informal."

"Why didn't he come in?"

"I told him you were engaged."

"Ah, very well. Say to Mrs. Belding that I will come, with pleasure."

II.

A High-School Graduate.

Miss Matchin picked up her train as she reached the gate, and walked down the street in a state of mind by no means tranquil. If she had put her thoughts in words they would have run like this:

"That was the meanest trick a gentleman ever played. How did he dare know I wasn't near-sighted? And what a fool I was to be caught by that photograph—saw it as plain as day three and well, so as to last out his boys' time as well as his own. When he was employed on the joiner-work of some of those large houses in Algonquin avenue, he lost himself in reveries in which he saw his daughters employed as housemaid in them. He studied the faces and words of the proprietors, when they visited the new buildings, to guess if they would make kind and considerate employers. He put many an extra stroke of fine work upon the servants' rooms he finished, thinking: "Who knows but my Mattie may live here some time?"

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But Saul Matchin found, like many others of us, that fate was not so easily managed. His boys never occupied the old shop on Dean street, which was built with so many sacrifices and so much of hopeful love. One of them ran away from home on the first intimation that he was expected to learn his father's trade, shipped as a cabin-boy on one of the lake steamers, and was drowned in a storm which destroyed the vessel. The other, less defiant or less energetic, entered the shop and attained some proficiency in the work. But as he grew toward manhood, he became, as the old man called it, "trifling;" a word which bore with it in the local dialect no suggestion of levity or vivacity, for Luke Matchin was as dark and lowering a lout as you would readily find. But it meant that he became more and more unpunctual, did his work worse month by month, came home later at night, and was continually seen, when not in the shop, with a gang of low ruffians, whose headquarters were in a den called the "Bird of Paradise," on the lake shore. When his father remonstrated with him, he met everything with sullen silence. If Saul lost his temper at this mute insolence and spoke sharply, the boy would retort with an evil grin that made the honest man's heart ache.

"Father," he said one day, "you'd a big sight better let me alone, if you don't want to drive me out of this ranch. I wasn't born to make a nigger of myself in a free country, and you can just bet your life I ain't a-going to do it."

These things grieved Saul Matchin so that his anger would die away. At last, one morning, after a daring burglary had been committed in Buffland, two policemen were seen by Luke Matchin approaching the shop. He threw open a back window, jumped out and ran rapidly down to the steep bluff overlooking the lake. When the officers entered Saul was alone in the place. They asked after his boy and he said:

"He can't be far away. What do you want of him? He hain't been doing nothing, I hope."

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"Nothing, so far as we know, but we are after two fellows who go by the names of Maumee Jake and Dutch George. Luke runs with them sometimes, and he could make a pile of money by helping of us to get them."

"I'll tell him when he comes in," said Saul, but he never saw or heard of his son again.

With his daughters he was scarcely more successful. For, though they had not brought sorrow or shame to his house, they seemed as little amenable to the discipline he had hoped to exert in his family as the boys were. The elder had married, at fifteen years of age, a journeyman printer; and so, instead of filling the place of housemaid in some good family, as her father had fondly dreamed, she was cook, housemaid and general servant to a man aware of his rights, and determined to maintain them, and nurse and mother (giving the more important function precedence) to six riotous children. Though his child had thus disappointed his hopes, she had not lost his affection and he even enjoyed the Sunday afternoon romp with his six grandchildren, which ordinarily took place in the shop among the shavings. Wixham, the son-in-law, was not prosperous, and the children were not so well dressed that the sawdust would damage their clothes.

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The youngest of Matchin's four children was our acquaintance, Miss Maud, as she called herself, though she was christened Matilda. When Mrs. Matchin was asked, after that ceremony, "Who she was named for?" she said, "Nobody in partic'lar. I call her Matildy because it's a pretty name, and goes well with Jurildy, my oldest gal." She had evolved that dreadful appellation out of her own mind. It had done no special harm, however, as Miss Jurildy had rechristened herself Poguy at a very tender age, in a praiseworthy attempt to say "rogue," and the delighted parents had never called her anything else. Thousands of comely damsels all over this broad land suffer under names as revolting, punished through life, by the stupidity of parental love, for a slip of the tongue in the cradle. Matilda got off easy in the matter of nicknames, being called Mattie until she was pretty well grown, and then having changed her name suddenly to Maud, for reasons to be given hereafter.

She was a hearty, blowzy little girl. Her father delighted in her coarse vigor and energy. She was not a pretty child, and had not a particle of coquetry in her, apparently; she liked to play with the boys when they would allow her, and never presumed upon her girlhood for any favors in their rough sport; and good-natured as she was, she was able to defend herself on occasion with tongue and fists. She was so full of life and strength that, when she had no playing to do, she took pleasure in helping her mother about her work. It warmed Saul Matchin's heart to see the stout little figure sweeping or scrubbing. She went to school, but did not "learn enough to hurt her," as her father said; and he used to think that here, at least, would be one child who would be a comfort to his age. In fancy he saw her, in a neat print dress and white cap, wielding a broom in one of those fine houses he had helped to build, or coming home to keep house for him when her mother should fail.

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But one day her fate came to her in the shape of a new girl, who sat near her on the school bench. It was a slender, pasty young person, an inch taller and a year or two older than Mattie, with yellow ringlets, and more pale-blue ribbons on her white dress than poor Mattie had ever seen before. She was a clean, cold, pale and selfish little vixen, whose dresses were never rumpled and whose temper was never ruffled. She had not blood enough in her veins to drive her to play or to anger. But she seemed to poor Mattie the loveliest creature she had even seen, and our brown, hard-handed, blowzy tomboy became the pale fairy's abject slave. Her first act of sovereignty was to change her vassal's name.

"I don't like Mattie; it ain't a bit romantic. I had a friend in Bucyrus whose name was Mattie, and she found out somehow—I believe the teacher told her—that Queen Matilda and Queen Maud was the same thing in England. So you're Maud!" and Maud she was henceforward, though her tyrant made her spell it Maude. "It's more elegant with an e," she said.

Maud was fourteen and her school-days were ending when she made this new acquaintance. She formed for Azalea Windom one of those violent idolatries peculiar to her sex and age, and in a fortnight she seemed a different person. Azalea was rather clever at her books, and Maud dug at her lessons from morning till night to keep abreast of her. Her idol was exquisitely neat in dress, and Maud acquired, as if by magic, a scrupulous care of her person. Azalea's blonde head was full of pernicious sentimentality, though she was saved from actual indiscretions by her cold and vaporous temperament. In dreams and fancies she was wooed and won a dozen times a day by splendid cavaliers of every race and degree; and as she was thoroughly false and vain, she detailed these airy adventures, part of which she had imagined and part read in weekly story papers, to her worshiper, who listened with wide eyeballs and a heart which was just beginning to learn how to beat. She initiated Maud into that strange world of vulgar and unhealthy sentiment found in the cheap weeklies which load every newsstand in the country, and made her tenfold more the child of dreams than herself.

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Miss Windom remained but a few months at the common school, and then left it for the high school. She told Maud one day of her intended flitting, and was more astonished than pleased at the passion of grief into which the announcement threw her friend. Maud clung to her with sobs that would not be stilled, and with tears that reduced Miss Azalea's dress to limp and moist wretchedness, but did not move the vain heart beneath it. "I wonder if she knows," thought Azalea, "how ugly she is when she bawls like that. Few brunettes can cry stylishly anyhow." Still, she could not help feeling flattered by such devotion, and she said, partly from a bit of careless kindness and partly to rescue the rest of her raiment from the shower which had ruined her neck ribbon:

"There, don't be heart-broken. You will be in the high school yourself in no time."

Maud lifted up her eyes and her heart at these words.

"Yes, I will, darling!"

She had never thought of the high school before. She had always expected to leave school that very season, and to go into service somewhere. But from that moment she resolved that nothing should keep her away from those walls that had suddenly become her Paradise.

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Her mother was easily won over. She was a woman of weak will, more afraid of her children than of her husband, a phenomenon of frequent occurrence in that latitude. She therefore sided naturally with her daughter in the contest which, when Maud announced her intention of entering the high school, broke out in the house and raged fiercely for some weeks. The poor woman had to bear the brunt of the battle alone, for Matchin soon grew shy of disputing with his rebellious child. She was growing rapidly and assuming that look of maturity which comes so suddenly and so strangely to the notice of a parent. When he attacked her one day with the brusque exclamation, "Well, Mattie, what's all this blamed foolishness your ma's being tellin' me?" she answered him with a cool decision and energy that startled him. She stood straight and terribly tall, he thought. She spoke with that fluent clearness of girls who know what they want, and used words he had never met with before out of a newspaper. He felt himself no match for her, and ended the discussion by saying: "That's all moonshine—you shan't go! D'ye hear me?" but he felt dismally sure that she would go in spite of him.

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Even after he had given up the fight, he continued to revenge himself upon his wife for his defeat. "We've got to have a set of gold spoons, I guess. These will never do for highfliers like us." Or, "Drop in at Swillem's and send home a few dozen champagne; I can't stummick such common drink as coffee for breakfast." Or, "I must fix up and make some calls on Algonkin av'noo. Sence we've jined the Upper Ten we mustn't go back on society." But this brute thunder had little effect on Mrs. Matchin. She knew the storm was over when her good-natured lord tried to be sarcastic.

It need hardly be said that Maud Matchin did not find the high school all her heart desired. Her pale goddess had not enough substantial character to hold her worshiper long. Besides, at fifteen, a young girl's heart is as variable as her mind or her person; and a great change was coming over the carpenter's daughter. She suddenly gained her full growth; and after the first awkwardness of her tall stature passed away, she began to delight in her own strength and beauty. Her pride waked at the same time with her vanity, and she applied herself closely to her books, so as to make a good appearance in her classes. She became the friend instead of the vassal of Azalea, and by slow degrees she found their positions reversed. Within a year it seemed perfectly natural to Maud that Azalea should do her errands and talk to her about her eyes; and Miss Windom found her little airs of superiority of no avail in face of the girl who had grown prettier, cleverer, and taller than herself.

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)